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Kevin Gary: [Why Boredom Matters: Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life.](#)

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Why Boredom Matters by Kevin Gary is a philosophical investigation into the moral dimension of boredom and a proposal for an antidote to it, especially in education. The starting point for Gary is the stultifying experience of school boredom and socialization towards it that schools produce. The author identifies two strategies that educational institutions advocate and teach: (1) boredom avoidance—“adopting new initiative after new initiative in the hope that boredom can be outrun altogether” (p. 1); and (2) resignation to boredom—accepting the boring situation as inevitable and complying with it. The combination of these two strategies, which constitute part of schools’ hidden curriculum (an implicit or latent message that is transmitted through education) is, as Gary rightly states, “arguably an ideal disposition for modern worker, who needs a capacity to endure, without complaint, hours of tedious and mindless tasks, punctuated by weekends filled with consumptive diversions” (p. 2). The message of education for capitalism is clear, as Gary points out: “Boredom should be, first and foremost, avoided; if avoidance is not possible, then it should be endured as an inevitable, albeit unpleasant, part of life” (p. 2). As a result, “we fashion lives that are essentially guided by boredom avoidance” (p. 3) as consumers and boredom resignation as employees. This situation is beneficial and, more to the point, profitable for capitalists, but inhibits human flourishing. As Gary claims, we are used to looking for remedies to our boredom in external sources, when actually, this problem “is rooted within the self” (p. 4)—and it should be resolved within it. Schools should “graduate students who know how to engage boredom productively when it arises” (p. 3), and the ultimate antidote to it, according to Gary, is teaching true leisure as “simply avoiding boredom or helplessly blaming boredom on something or someone else” (p. 3) does not solve the problem of situational boredom but rather only deepens existential boredom.

The book is logically and well-structured, with one line of reasoning. The starting point for Gary is showing the moral significance of boredom and finding a true remedy to the problem it poses. The author observes the ‘de-moralization’ of boredom—it is now regarded more as a neutral state rather than a serious moral concern. Yet, as Gary reasons, by avoiding boredom, “we are losing our moral compass”, and boredom “negatively impacts [...] our moral reasoning” (p. 5). Essentially, the author deals primarily with existential boredom, the state of crisis of meaning associated with the feeling of vanity about everything and losing the will or desire to do anything, as nothing is worth pursuing. Gary understands existential boredom more or less in the same way as Heidegger, but his reasoning is primarily based on Kierkegaard’s concept of sickness unto death, i.e., despair. According to this Danish Christian philosopher, as Gary reads him, boredom is a form of despair. It is caused by the avoidance or failure to properly synthesize the parts of the self (body and soul). Kierkegaard distinguishes two kinds of despair: (1) despair of infinitude/possibility—one becomes lost among uncountable and unrealizable possibilities; this kind of despair, according to Gary, correlates with boredom avoidance; and (2) despair of finitude/necessity—one accepts a worldly mentality and cannot see anything beyond everyday matters; this kind correlates with boredom resignation. Existential boredom is a form of despair and is universal: “The key distinction is not whether or not we are in despair, but the degree to which we are conscious of this fact or not” (p. 64). In other words, according to Gary, everybody, to some extent, experiences existential boredom.

To such a universal malaise, Gary sees ‘a promising antidote’ in the practice of leisure. Yet, what we understand and practice as leisure nowadays is not the leisure that Gary advocates.

In popular usage, leisure serves as a synonym for rest and relaxation, the mere opposite of work, usually in the form of amusement. Such leisure does not cure existential boredom; but, contrarily, in the end, it intensifies it. Following Aristotle, Gary contends that true leisure is “a state of inner tranquility that enables the soul to greet the world receptively, in awareness of its mystery, rather than as something to be mastered” (p. 79). In other words, it is a practice focused on benefits inherent to the activity and not aimed at external benefits (achievements, etc.). In our modern society, such leisure is rare, as everything should be done for a reason (we have a “production-oriented” conception of action [Brewer, 2009, p. 13]) and should be rationalized by external benefits—we jog for health betterment, we read to pass the exam, we cook to nourish ourselves, we work to be paid, etc. Gary reminds us that true leisure, or acquiring a ‘leisurely state of mind’, requires discipline, vigilance, and training: “Leisure is a state of mind in which we receptively behold the world, attend to its unique sensory and spiritual offerings, and open ourselves to be transformed by the message these have for us” (p. 84). As Gary attempts to convince us, such leisure embraces not only creative and/or meditative activities such as art, scientific inquiry, or sports, but also mundane activities such as cooking or walking. True leisure is about deep attendance (awareness of the present moment) and connection between our bodies and minds as well as between us and others. The book concludes with a short description of ways in which a leisurely way of being can be learnt and cultivated.

The book is well-written and reads well; it was definitely a pleasure to read it. It is also nicely structured and highly disciplined in its thinking. The discussion of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair and boredom is invigorating, highly captivating, and well delivered. I find the author’s thesis about the universality of existential boredom highly intriguing. I am not certain that it is correct, as the author does not discuss it further—it is, rather, an initial assumption provided without thorough analysis. To that proposition, I am tempted to respond using Leopardi’s statement—as I would always like to respond to all those who deny ever being bored—that “boredom is felt only by those in whom the mind is of some relevance” (2015, sec. 4306)—and I am not at all convinced that this is something so universal as despair for Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, putting aside our opposite views on the prevalence of existential boredom, it is an interesting contribution to the ongoing discussion. Peter Toohey (2011) claimed that existential boredom is a category whose “basis is more intellectual than experiential” and a condition that seems “to be more read about and discussed than actually experienced” (p. 6). However, Lars Svendsen (2016) disagrees, pointing to himself as a specimen of existential boredom. Gary adds a new chapter to that discussion.

I have three major criticisms of Gary’s book. The first concerns boredom, the second leisure, and the third morality and acedia.

1. As a boredom scholar and researcher, I find the literature review on boredom rather poor, as it does not even cover the most vital references to philosophical sources on boredom. The discussion on Heidegger is very short and many papers on boredom in his oeuvre are not referenced. Moreover, Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Cioran, and Sartre are not mentioned; the only exception is a brief discussion of Camus’ interpretation of Sisyphus’ myth. I would expect better grounding in the boredom literature from a book about boredom, so as to avoid reinventing the wheel. The concept of existential boredom should be more thoroughly introduced and analyzed

to back the thesis about its universality. Moreover, Gary proposes *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath as his main literary example of existential boredom. I am not at all sure that this is an actual case of existential boredom, but, rather, depression—taking into account the main character’s somatic symptoms. The concrete differences between existential boredom and depression are challenging to clearly explain but the two have been shown to be distinct (Bargdill, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2011). The discussion about existential boredom should address such distinctions and nuances to be complete.

2. My second critical point concerns the proposed remedy to boredom. The presented theory of leisure resembles the concepts of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), momentum (Adler, 1981), or mindfulness. These concepts should be critically discussed and compared to the presented concept of leisure. My second point here is that the proposed antidote to allegedly universal boredom seems to me to not be easily implemented universally. In other words, the leisure presented by Gary appears to be a rather difficult endeavour involving vigilance, discipline, and long training. I doubt this solution is for everyone—this is rather an elitist and philosophical proposition.

3. The last significant doubt is the usage of primarily Christian sources on morality, as if Christian sources were the ultimate source for discussions of morality. Although Gary starts with Aristotle, he more often consults Thomas Aquinas, who baptized this Greek philosopher. There are many references to St. Augustine and Christian (mostly Catholic) theologians, not to mention Kierkegaard, a deeply Christian philosopher. I am not convinced that academic books in the domain of moral philosophy about boredom should be overwhelmingly based on Christian sources. And if the author wants to adopt a Christian perspective, he should have referenced the tradition of *acedia*. However, the concept of *acedia* is mentioned only a few times in a rather cursory fashion. Gary claims that “modern boredom arguably parallels *acedia*” (p. 7), is a precursor of boredom, and that the perspective of Evagrius on boredom (actually on *acedia*) should be restored. Yet, the rich historical sources on *acedia* and modern discussion on it are never employed in the book, which I consider to be a significant omission in work on why boredom as a moral problem matters.

Finally, I would not be a proper bore if I did not mention some minor factual errors. In the book, Peter Toohey is called a “philosopher” (p. 11)—he is actually a classical philologist. Later, Goetz et al.’s (2014) apathetic boredom is claimed to be “interchangeable with existential boredom” (p. 28). This is definitely not the case, as the authors did not employ the concept of existential boredom or even use the word ‘existential’ in their paper. Finally, Gary uses the famous quote from Tolstoy about “a desire for desire” (p. 32), claiming that Alexei Vronsky was a protagonist of *War and Peace* while he was a character in *Anna Karenina*.

Critical comments aside, *Why Boredom Matters* is an interesting, well-written, and concise (about 130-page long) book for all those who wonder whether there is an alternative to the capitalist, extremely bored, busy self. Outside of, or rather aside from, boredom studies, Gary creates a disciplined reflection over the problem of boredom proposing a challenging but nevertheless so desperately-needed antidote to it. For that, despite its limitations and shortcomings, it is worth noticing and engaging in critical discussion.

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